

# Moving from primary to secondary school

Supporting pupils with an autism spectrum disorder



**The transition from primary to secondary school is a major change in any child's life, and pupils with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in particular may need support at this time.**

This guide is for teachers, SENCOs and learning support staff who will be helping pupils with an ASD through transition. Parents and carers will also find it useful.

## **What changes does transition bring?**

Moving from primary to secondary school brings with it a number of changes. Pupils with an ASD can find new and unfamiliar people, places and situations hard to cope with, so it will help to prepare them for these changes as thoroughly as you can. Some of the more common changes they will face are:

- travelling to a new area to go to secondary school, possibly using school transport for the first time
- a new building
- new timetables
- new teachers and classmates
- more teachers for different subjects
- a much larger number of pupils
- new and different routines, eg lunchtime arrangements.

Good preparation can help alleviate some of the difficulties or anxiety that pupils experience at transition.

## **Parents, primary and secondary staff working together**

This guide talks about the main areas where pupils with an ASD may need help when they move to secondary school. However, every child with an ASD is



Accept difference. Not indifference.

# Classroom and playground

different, so it's a good idea for secondary school staff to get as much information as possible about a child's specific needs from parents, carers and primary school staff.

Most secondary schools have a person who is responsible for liaising with primary schools in their catchment area – often the head of Year 7 – who will be finding out about children with special educational needs who are due to move up to secondary school. With all children, but perhaps especially those with an ASD, it pays to identify their needs in advance so that the transition can be carefully planned and managed. This gives it a much better chance of being successful.

Children with an ASD often struggle with change, new environments and meeting new people. They may also need some extra support at school, for example a visual timetable, a desk that is positioned away from doors and windows to help them concentrate, or peer support in the playground (all discussed in this guide). It's important to identify a child's specific needs, rather than creating a generic transition plan.

If possible, visit the pupil's primary school. Staff may be able to give you a good idea of what is likely to make the pupil anxious; you can then plan for transition with this in mind. Parents and carers will also be an excellent source of information.

Invite pupils to visit their new school, perhaps several times before September. This may really help them to feel more familiar with the place, and better prepared. It is also a chance to eliminate (or identify) any concerns.

Meeting new teachers and learning support assistants can help to reduce stress: a pupil with an ASD will feel more comfortable if they are familiar with some of the people at their new school. Can you offer them the chance to do this?

## Supporting pupils with an ASD at secondary school


Once at secondary school, pupils with an ASD may need help with daily tasks and events, such as using timetables, finding their way around the school, or coping during break times and lunchtimes – which they may find especially difficult.

Providing this day-to-day support is all part of managing pupils' transition from primary to secondary. Here are some ways in which you can help.

### Travelling to school

For many young people, the first time they travel 'alone' may be when they go to secondary school. If a pupil with an ASD is going to be using a school bus, or a form of public transport, they will need to be prepared for this. The pupil needs to know:

- where to wait for the bus (or other form of transport, eg train)
- how and when to use their bus pass or pay for their ticket (if applicable)
- what time the bus leaves
- how much time they should allow to get to the bus stop
- roughly how long the journey takes
- who to go to with problems
- what to do if the bus doesn't arrive
- where to get off the bus.



They will also need to know the same information for the journey home. You may be able to provide this, in consultation with parents.

Pupils may need some help, too, to cope with social situations that occur on journeys to school, such as noise, banter or teasing. If possible, pupils could travel with someone they know, for the first few days at least. Doing a trial run of their journey before the school term starts will also be helpful.

### **The geography of the school**

Secondary schools can at first appear very big, and seemingly difficult to navigate.

To help pupils with an ASD, you could give them a map that contains as much detail as possible, including room numbers and descriptions. Some of the detail might be visual, as pupils with an ASD often find visual information easier to use.

Pupils can also learn various ‘landmarks’ that describe locations. For example, room A13 is the room for English lessons at the top of the stairs near the library.

It is worth spending time navigating the school with pupils and learning where the important places are, such as their tutor room, the library, toilets, etc. Some schools have a buddy system and the buddy could help with this (see the section ‘Peer support’).

### **Following a timetable**

At secondary school, timetables can be one of the main things children need to get used to, and they can at first appear complicated, especially if your school uses a two-week timetable. In primary school, children are often taught by one teacher,

usually in the same classroom. This all changes at secondary school.

Many people with an ASD find visual information helpful; therefore, to make a timetable more accessible to a pupil with an ASD you could use one of the following methods.

- Replace initials for subjects with symbols.  
Try using a picture of a globe instead of Gg for Geography, for example.
- Colour code different subjects.
- Use pictures of clock faces instead of times or ‘Period 1’, etc.

You could also provide short written descriptions to help pupils understand where lessons take place, and who will be teaching them. This can help a pupil with an ASD to feel better prepared and may reduce anxiety.

- Write out teachers’ names for each subject in full.
- Use classroom numbers, along with brief descriptions of each room.

The exact format a timetable takes will vary depending upon the needs of individual pupils.

Parents and carers could also have a copy of the timetable prominently displayed at home so their child can refer to it there, if they need to.

### **Using lockers**

If pupils at your school have lockers, a pupil with an ASD may need to:

- be shown where their locker is and possibly be given help (again, by using ‘landmarks’)
- keep their locker key in a particular place:

# Classroom and playground

attached to a belt perhaps, or in a wallet or purse with their dinner money

- have a procedure to follow if they have mislaid their key. For example, they might know that they should go to the school office, where they can ask for a spare key.

## Using a diary

Having a diary, with checklists and sets of simple instructions, can be really beneficial for pupils with an ASD. It gives them a point of reference, and it can be used to tell them in advance about any changes or special events.

The diary can also include information about homework: again, it gives pupils an easy point of reference and can help them see what work they need to do, when.

Where possible, learning support assistants should be responsible for checking that homework information has been entered correctly. School staff should also make a note in the diary if a letter is given to a pupil to take home.

You can also use the diary to tell pupils and their parents of upcoming events or changes to their timetable. This helps pupils with an ASD to prepare for change.

If the diary contains checklists, keep them simple and clear. They can help to reduce uncertainty and stress. Checklists could include 'What to do if I lose my dinner money' and 'What to do if it rains at break time'.

Finally, it will be useful to attach a clear map of the school and a timetable (possibly a visual one) to the diary.

## Added responsibility

At secondary school, pupils have responsibility for their pencil case, books, equipment, PE kit, cookery items and so on. To help pupils with an ASD plan what they need to have with them, you could again use checklists. Small laminated cards, for example, could list what they need to have with them to do PE. Alternatively, if pupils are using a diary (as described previously), checklists could be written in there.

Some pupils with an ASD cannot manage to organise lockers, books and equipment at school. They may end up without equipment and books in lessons, or just carrying around huge numbers of books all the time. If this is a problem, school books and equipment could be kept at home and a parent or carer can help them sort out the things they need to take to school the next day.


## Procedures for break times and lunchtimes

At break times and lunchtimes, pupils with an ASD will need to know:

- where to go, how to get their lunch (if they don't bring their own), where to sit
- what lunchtime clubs, if any, are available
- where they can go for help if they need it.

Break times and lunchtimes can be a problem because of the relative lack of structure, the noise, smells (in the dining hall), activity and movement.

Giving a pupil with an ASD a task to do during unstructured time is an option, but it is important that tasks cannot be interpreted as punishment, eg litter picking.



Bullying can be a problem and many pupils with an ASD benefit from access to a quiet ‘refuge’. A buddy system or a circle of friends can also be helpful, and some pupils may like to go to lunchtime clubs if they are offered.

Our publication *Understanding difficulties at break time and lunchtime* has more information about social support for pupils with an ASD. It’s available to download from [www.autism.org.uk/freetime](http://www.autism.org.uk/freetime)

### **Social and communication difficulties**

Pupils with an ASD can misunderstand tasks and instructions. Some may appear to defy your instructions or requests, but in actual fact may simply not understand what you’re asking them to do.

For example, if you say ‘Everyone line up’, a pupil with an ASD may not respond because they’re not ‘Everyone’. Saying a pupil’s name before starting to talk to them is more likely to get their attention, and make it clear that you are addressing them.

Equally, pupils with an ASD may not always be sure what is being asked of them in class, or find it difficult to follow lessons or instructions. Perhaps the pace of a lesson is too fast, or they cannot process all the information quickly enough. Support from a teaching assistant or learning support staff can help. If support is put in place when a pupil first comes to secondary school, this is obviously beneficial.

Points to remember:

- ‘bad’ behaviour can be due to difficulties with communication or understanding
- ‘defiance’ can be due to not understanding or slower processing speed: give pupils time
- break down tasks into small chunks
- keep instructions simple and clear
- use visual supports wherever possible
- pupils with an ASD may well have difficulty making choices, so it is best to limit choices to two or three
- allow pupils five minutes’ chill-out time in difficult moments
- many pupils with an ASD will benefit from a ‘refuge’, a safe, quiet place in the school where they can relax and get support from people who will listen to them.

### **Peer support**

Young people with an ASD often have difficulties socialising and making friends. To a great extent, this is because all people with autism have some degree of difficulty with communication and social interaction.

A buddy system or circle of friends can help. Our publication *Classroom and playground* has more information about buddy systems and the circle of friends. It’s available to download from: [www.autism.org.uk/classroom-playground](http://www.autism.org.uk/classroom-playground)

Young people with an ASD can become a target for bullies. Sometimes they will not say, or be able to recognise, that they are being bullied. In this case changes in behaviour, either at home or in school, can be a clue. Our publication, *Bullying and autism spectrum disorders: a guide for school staff*, may be useful to you (see ‘Recommended reading’).

# Classroom and playground

---

## Conclusion

Moving from primary to secondary school is a big event in any young person's life, and pupils with an ASD in particular need support at this time.

It is important for staff at primary and secondary schools to work together to put support in place – and also to involve parents and carers, who know their child better than anyone, in transition planning.

Pupils with an ASD can do well at secondary school if they receive support: often, relatively simple things such as visual timetables can be of great help.

With an understanding of pupils' individual needs, forward planning and preparation, the transition from primary to secondary school can be a positive experience for young people with an ASD.



## Recommended reading

Many of the books on this list are available to buy from our website. We receive 5% of the sale price from all the books we sell through [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Beaney, J. and Kershaw, P. (2006).** *Inclusion in the secondary school: support materials for children with autistic spectrum disorders.* London: The National Autistic Society.  
Available from [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Colley, J. (2005).** *Working with an Asperger pupil in secondary schools.* London: The National Autistic Society. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Jackson, L. (2002).** *Freaks, geeks and Asperger syndrome.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.  
Available from [www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazonshop)

**Knott, F. and Dunlop, A-W. (2007).** *Developing social interaction and understanding: a resource for working with children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders.* London: The National Autistic Society. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council (1998).** *Asperger syndrome: practical strategies for the classroom.* London: The National Autistic Society. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Stobart, A. (2009).** *Bullying and autism spectrum disorders: a guide for school staff.* London: The National Autistic Society.  
Available from [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Thorpe, P. (2005).** *Bullying and how to deal with it: a guide for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders.* London: The National Autistic Society. Available from [www.autism.org.uk/pubs](http://www.autism.org.uk/pubs)

**Thorpe, P. (2004).** *Understanding difficulties at break time and lunchtime.* London: The National Autistic Society. Available to download from: [www.autism.org.uk/freetime](http://www.autism.org.uk/freetime)

## Written by Patricia Thorpe

Patricia worked for many years in a school with children with an ASD in Norfolk. She now works with adults who have an ASD and learning difficulties.

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism.

Over half a million people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over two million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day.

Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. Which means that many of these two million people get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need.

*Together, we are going to change this.*

The National Autistic Society  
393 City Road  
London EC1V 1NG

Switchboard: 020 7833 2299  
Autism Helpline: 0808 800 4104  
Minicom: 0845 070 4003  
Fax: 020 7833 9666  
Email: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk)  
Website: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)